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Eliminating 'Life Worth Living'

Abstract

This article argues for the elimination of the concept of life worth living from philosophical vocabulary on three complementary grounds. First, the basic components of this concept suffer from multiple ambiguities, which hamper attempts to ground informative evaluative and classificatory judgments about the worth of life. Second, the criteria proposed to track the extension of the concept of life worth living rest on unsupported axiological assumptions and fail to identify precise and plausible referents for this concept. And third, the concept of life worth living is not shown to serve any major evaluative or classificatory purpose besides those served by already available axiological concepts. By eliminating the concept of life worth living, philosophers will free themselves of the task of addressing ill-posed axiological questions and ground reflection about the worth of life on more rigorous conceptual foundations.

Keywords: Life; Worth; Axiology; Bioethics; Population Ethics; Eliminativism.

1. Introduction

Is life worth living? What, if anything, makes life worth living? What does it even mean to claim that life is (or is not) worth living? These questions have been widely debated by philosophers (see e.g. Benatar, 2006, Broome, 2004, 2005 and 2008, Camus, 1955, Harries, 1991, McDermott, 1991, and McMahan, 1981, 1988 and 2013). In recent years, various authors attempted to identify precise and plausible referents for the concept of life worth living (henceforth, LWL) and specify what goods and experiences can make life worth living (see e.g. Audi, 2003 and 2005, Blumenfeld, 2009, Farsides and Dunlop, 2001, Metz, 2001, 2012 and 2014, and Trisel, 2007). Even so, widespread disagreements remain as to whether there are facts that determine whether specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living, what facts (if any) these are, and whether we are in the epistemic position to reliably identify such facts.[1]

In this article, I argue for the elimination of the concept of LWL from philosophical vocabulary on three complementary grounds. First, the basic components of this concept suffer from multiple ambiguities, which hamper attempts to ground informative evaluative and classificatory judgments about the worth of life. Second, the criteria proposed to track the extension of LWL rest on unsupported axiological assumptions and fail to identify precise and plausible referents for this concept. And third, the concept of LWL is not shown to serve any major evaluative or classificatory purpose besides those served by already available axiological concepts. My claim is not just that people speak of 'LWL' in dissimilar senses or that different authors disagree as to whether specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living. Rather, my thesis is that the proponents of LWL have hitherto failed to specify what exactly LWL judgments mean, and that the concept of LWL can be replaced with other axiological concepts (e.g. prudential and ethical worth) without any loss of content. In particular, the pre-theoretical notions that LWL is claimed to track are so elusive and confused that we should eliminate this concept altogether.[2]

The contents are organized as follows. In *Section 2*, I examine the basic components of LWL and argue that grounding informative LWL judgments requires the

[1] Below I focus on lives taken as a whole (from birth to death) rather than lives in specific contexts or at a given moment, without taking a position on metaphysical issues such as the hypothetical existence of an afterlife. In particular, I use the term 'life' to indicate the life of a human person (as opposed to non-human animals, extraterrestrial organisms, etc.) because most debates about LWL focus on human persons' lives. In doing so, I gloss over the debate concerning what conditions a life has to satisfy to be regarded as the life of a human person (see e.g. Finnis, 1989, and Gormally, 1993), since my call to eliminate LWL does not directly rest on what position one advocates about such conditions.

[2] I employ the expression 'proponents of LWL' broadly to indicate both occasional users of LWL and those who deem LWL judgments to be meaningful and informative, where the expression 'LWL judgments' designates claims stating that specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are (or are not) worth living. I expand in later sections on the conceptual and epistemic differences between various types of LWL judgments (see e.g. *Section 4.4* on comparative and absolute LWL judgments).

proponents of LWL to disambiguate this concept in at least three respects. In *Section 3*, I reconstruct and critique the most prominent criteria proposed to track the extension of LWL. In *Section 4*, I identify and rebut five major objections to my call to eliminate LWL. If successful, this call has widespread implications for both theoretical and practical debates of philosophical interest. For many such debates are premised on the assumption that there are facts determining whether specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living and that we are in the epistemic position to reliably identify such facts (see e.g. Narveson, 1967 and 1973, and Parfit, 1982 and 1984, on population ethics debates on the morality of bringing into existence people who will putatively have lives worth living; see also Kon, 2007, Lulé et al., 2009, and Singer, 1993, on bioethical debates on whether it is morally justifiable to terminate a person's life on the alleged ground that this life is not worth living). If these assumptions about LWL are untenable, then such debates are better reconceptualized in terms of other axiological concepts (e.g. prudential and ethical worth). In this perspective, my call to eliminate LWL can be seen as a constructive challenge to ground philosophical reflection about the worth of life on more rigorous conceptual foundations.

2. LWL: Ambiguities

In this section, I examine the basic components of LWL and argue that grounding informative LWL judgments requires the proponents of LWL to disambiguate this concept in at least three respects. The first ambiguity concerns the demarcation of what goods and experiences are encompassed by a person's *life*. The second ambiguity relates to the specification of what dimensions of *worth* are tracked by LWL. The third ambiguity targets the identification of what criteria are employed to *track the extension* of LWL. The existence of these ambiguities does not *per se* license my call to eliminate LWL. For in spite of those ambiguities, the proponents of LWL might succeed in providing characterizations of LWL that are sufficiently precise and plausible for specific evaluative and classificatory purposes. However, as I argue in *Section 3*, the proponents of LWL have hitherto failed to identify precise and plausible referents for LWL. This failure, together with the fact that LWL is not shown to serve any major evaluative or classificatory purpose besides those served by already available axiological concepts (see *Section 4*), provisionally makes LWL a suitable target for elimination. Moreover, it points to definitional and pragmatic reasons why my call to eliminate LWL does not generalize to other ambiguous concepts that figure prominently in philosophical discussions (see e.g. *Section 4.5* on the concepts of cause, knowledge, and well-being).[3]

[3] The three ambiguities I examine in this section highlight both definitional disagreements concerning the concept of LWL and substantive disagreements concerning what facts putatively determine whether specific lives are worth living. These two types of disagreements are often intertwined, but are conceptually distinct (see e.g. footnote no.5). I discuss both types of disagreements since my critical evaluation targets not just the concept of LWL, but also LWL judgments.

2.1 When discussing whether specific lives are worth living, most proponents of LWL point to the presence (or absence) of certain goods and experiences (see e.g. Hurka, 1993, ch.2-4, on self-awareness, Nozick, 1981, ch.6, on transcending the limits of the self, and Singer, 1993, ch.12, on alleviating suffering in other sentient beings). The idea is that lives are worth living if they include these goods and experiences, or at least would be worth living if they included such goods and experiences. As Metz puts it, "a life is worth living insofar as it has enough of the right sort of goods [and experiences] to outweigh the bad in it" (2014, 3602). The proponents of LWL advocate dissimilar views of what goods and experiences are encompassed by a person's *life*. Two views are especially prominent. On the one hand, several authors advocate what we may call a *narrow* conception of life, which equates a person's life with "a sequence of states or events within his body and mind" (Hurka, 1998, 307; see also McMahan, 1988 and 1995, for the claim that a person begins to exist when her organism's brain develops the capacity for consciousness). On the other hand, others endorse a *wide* conception of life, which alleges that a person's life encompasses goods and experiences of which this person has neither experiential nor propositional knowledge (e.g. the status of one's posthumous reputation, the deeds of one's descendants). In the words of Nagel, "a man's life includes much that does not take place within the boundaries of his body and his mind, and what happens to him can include much that does not take place within the boundaries of his [lifetime]" (1979, 6; see also Kagan, 1994, and Levinson, 2004, for similar remarks).[4]

Grounding informative LWL judgments would require the proponents of LWL to demarcate what goods and experiences are encompassed by the examined persons' lives, or at least specify whether they endorse a narrow or wide conception of life. For LWL judgments can vary dramatically depending on which of these two conceptions of life one endorses (see e.g. Metz, 2013, ch.2-3). To illustrate this, consider the case of a cruel dictator whose descendants discover the remedy for an otherwise incurable life-threatening pandemic. Whether the dictator's life is regarded as worth living may crucially depend on whether the dictator's life is taken to encompass only the facts occurred during the dictator's lifetime (e.g. his dreadful deeds) or also facts occurred outside this lifetime (e.g. the discovery made by the dictator's descendants). These remarks hold not just for a few imaginary cases, but also for many real-life situations. To see this, consider the often-debated issue

[4] I speak of 'goods' and 'experiences' broadly to encompass the events and the states of affairs corresponding to persons' obtaining such goods and living such experiences. Also, I focus primarily on the concept of life worth *living* rather than the concept of life worth *continuing*, i.e. a life whose *remaining* period is worth living (see e.g. Benatar, 2006, ch.2, and Smuts, 2013). The alleged fact that a person's life is not worth continuing after a specific time does not imply that such life on the whole is not worth living for this person (as a putative example, think of a person who lives ninety years of amazing bliss and achievements but faces a final week of unbearable pain and loneliness). Conversely, the past period in a person's life may conceivably include so much physical and psychological suffering that although the period ahead may be worth living, this person's life may fail to be worth living on the whole.

whether posthumous events can affect the worth of lives by benefiting and harming a person who died. The proponents of the wide conception of life (e.g. Levinson, 2004, and Nagel, 1979) frequently hold that a person can be benefited and harmed posthumously (e.g. by having her reputation enhanced and destroyed). The proponents of the narrow conception of life, instead, often argue that since a person who died is no longer in existence, "there will be no carrier of value or disvalue", and so such a person can be neither benefited nor harmed posthumously (Paterson, 2003, 18; see also Partridge, 1981). In this perspective, demarcating what goods and experiences are encompassed by a person's life (or at least specifying whether one endorses a narrow or wide conception of life) seems to constitute a minimal requirement for grounding informative LWL judgments about such life.

2.2 Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the proponents of LWL demarcated what goods and experiences are encompassed by a person's life. Grounding informative LWL judgments would also require the proponents of LWL to specify what dimension(s) of *worth* are tracked by LWL. After all, it would be hard to see what it means to claim that a person's life is (or is not) worth living in the absence of clear indications concerning what dimension(s) of worth such claim putatively tracks. The worth of a person's life can be assessed along a number of dimensions. Four non-exhaustive dimensions are often distinguished in the LWL literature, namely: prudential worth, which concerns how well a life goes for the person living it (see e.g. Wilkinson, 2011); aesthetic worth, which concerns a life's capacity to elicit aesthetic pleasure or appreciation in the person who lives or contemplates this life (see e.g. Nehamas, 2007); perfectionist worth, which concerns the extent to which a person's life exemplifies some specified excellences and achieves choice-worthy goals (see e.g. Heyd, 1983, on self-realization); and ethical worth, which concerns how well a person's life fares according to distinct moral theories (see e.g. Garrard and Wilkinson, 2006).

Significant interrelations have been posited between these dimensions of worth (see e.g. Feldman, 1995, for the claim that how well a person's life fares in terms of prudential worth partly depends on this person's desert). Still, those dimensions are conceptually distinct (see e.g. Sumner, 1996, 20-25). In particular, how well a life fares in terms of one dimension of worth does not *per se* determine how well such a life fares in terms of other dimensions (see e.g. Blumenfeld, 2009, on divergences between prudential and ethical worth, Metz, 2012, on divergences between prudential and perfectionist worth, and Williams, 1981, on divergences between aesthetic, perfectionist and ethical worth). In fact, fundamental divergences arise even with respect to single dimensions of worth. For instance, different conceptions of prudential worth disagree as to whether the locus of prudential worth is pleasure (e.g. hedonistic conceptions), preference satisfaction (e.g. preference satisfaction conceptions), or objectively worthy goods and experiences (e.g. objective list conceptions). Moreover, each of these conceptions has several fine-grained versions with conflicting implications (see e.g. Fumagalli, 2016, on conflicts between actual, informed and ideal preference satisfaction conceptions).

Due to these differences, it would be implausibly restrictive to take LWL to encompass all and only those lives that fare highly in terms of *one single* dimension of worth (see e.g. Harris, 1985). Still, taking LWL to track how lives fare in terms of *several* dimensions of worth challenges one to specify what dimensions of worth are tracked by LWL (e.g. all the aforementioned dimensions of worth, or just a subset?) and what weights are ascribed to each dimension (e.g. are some dimensions of worth lexicographically prior to others, or does LWL track a weighted index of distinct dimensions? If so, by means of what criteria should we establish what weight to ascribe to each dimension?). This challenge is especially pressing for the proponents of LWL. For the putative extension of LWL can vary dramatically depending on what dimensions of worth are tracked by LWL and what weights are ascribed to each dimension. For example, take the claims that "life can be worth living in locked-in syndrome" (Lulé et al., 2009, 339) and that "when the life of an infant will be so miserable as not to be worth living […] the child should be helped to die without further suffering" (Singer, 1993, 184). These claims can be ascribed rather different meanings and practical implications depending on what dimensions of worth are tracked by LWL and what weights one ascribes to each dimension (see e.g. Sundström, 1995, on Singer, 1993; see *Section 3* for further examples).

2.3 Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the proponents of LWL demarcated what goods and experiences are encompassed by a person's life. Assume further that they provided precise and plausible specifications of what dimensions of worth are tracked by LWL and what weights are ascribed to each dimension. Grounding informative LWL judgments would also require the proponents of LWL to identify what criteria are employed to *track the extension* of LWL. Two sets of criteria have been employed in the literature. On the one hand, *subjectivist* criteria hold that whether a person's life is worth living solely depends on the person's subjective judgment and attitude toward her life (see e.g. Ayer, 1990, ch.10, and James, 1895). The idea is that whether life is worth living is "a purely subjective matter" (Heyd, 1983, 37) and that "the value of our lives is the value we give to our lives" (Harris, 1997a, 11). On the other hand, *objectivist* criteria hold that some goods and experiences (e.g. autonomy and achievement) can make a person's life worth living irrespective of the person's subjective judgment and attitude toward her life (see e.g. Arneson, 1999, and Nozick, 1981, ch.6). The thought is that "lives are worth living if they are high in various objective goods and low in objective bads" (Smuts, 2014, 711).

To be sure, several objectivist criteria allow that whether a person's life is worth living may partly depend on the person's subjective judgment and attitude toward her life (see e.g. Wolf, 1997, for the claim that a person's life is worth living to the extent that this person is actively engaged with objectively worthy projects). However, on objectivist criteria, whether a person's life is worth living does not solely depend on the person's subjective judgment and attitude toward her life. In fact, most objectivist criteria emphasize that "we may be [radically] mistaken about the value of our current activities", and that "we may come to see that we have been wasting our lives" (Kymlicka, 1990, 202; see also Wilkinson, 2011). I shall expand in the next

section on the challenges facing attempts to use subjectivist and objectivist criteria to track the extension of LWL. For now, I note that grounding informative LWL judgments would require the proponents of LWL to specify whether they rely on subjectivist or objectivist criteria. For LWL judgments can vary remarkably depending on which of these criteria one endorses (e.g. think of a happy sadistic dictator whose orders cause the subsequent extinction of the human species and of an irredeemably depressed researcher who discovers the remedy for an otherwise incurable life-threatening pandemic; see *Section 3* for further illustrations).[5]

3. LWL: Referential Concerns

In this section, I reconstruct and critique the most prominent criteria proposed to track the extension of LWL. More specifically, I consider in turn four subjectivist criteria (namely, the *Survival Criterion*, the *Desire Criterion*, the *Recurrence Criterion* and the *Meaning Criterion*) and four objectivist criteria (namely, the *Sanctity of Life Criterion*, the *Quality of Life Criterion*, the *Difference Making Criterion* and the *Ideal Caretaker Criterion*). I shall argue that in spite of their prominence, these criteria rest on unsupported axiological assumptions and fail to identify precise and plausible referents for LWL. The following dilemma is especially challenging for the proponents of LWL. On the one hand, subjectivist criteria lack the conceptual resources to discriminate between inconsistent LWL judgments, and presuppose (rather than show) that the fact that they classify some lives as LWL provides informative axiological insights. On the other hand, objectivist criteria fail to precisely demarcate what goods and experiences can be plausibly taken to make life worth living, and are specified at too high a level of abstraction to ground informative LWL judgments. In assessing each criterion, I put forward various claims concerning what lives one may conceivably deem to be (or not to be) worth living. In doing so, I neither assume nor concede that LWL judgments are meaningful and informative. On the contrary, I critically build on what prominent proponents of LWL regard as paradigmatic instances of LWL.[6]

[5] LWL judgments may vary remarkably also depending on whether one asks the persons whose lives are evaluated or some other persons. To give one example, LWL judgments about the lives of persons with disabilities frequently vary depending on whether one asks the persons whose lives are evaluated, healthcare providers or the general public (see e.g. Wilkinson, 2011). Indeed, these variations occur not just interpersonally but also intertemporally for the same persons (see e.g. Kon, 2008, on how various persons' LWL judgments vary before and after these persons have to cope with a disability). These variations often make LWL judgments controversial, but do not directly reflect ambiguities inherent in the LWL concept itself.

[6] In this section, I examine the most prominent criteria proposed to track the extension of LWL, individually taken (for other critical evaluations of some criteria, see e.g. Baier, 1988, Blumenfeld, 2009, and Smuts, 2013). I lack the space here to consider hypothetical combinations of distinct criteria. For my purposes, it suffices to note that no detailed combinations of criteria have been developed, and that the profound tensions between distinct sets of criteria (see e.g. *Section 2* on subjectivist versus objectivist criteria) hinder the development of such combinations.

3.1 Subjectivist Criteria

3.1.1 The *Survival Criterion* holds that a person's life is worth living iff this person performs actions (e.g. ingests food and liquids, refrains from suicidal behaviour, asks others to keep her alive) that foreseeably help to prolong her life (see e.g. Heyd, 1983). Does this criterion reliably track the extension of LWL? It does not seem so. After all, one may perform actions that foreseeably help to prolong her life because of several reasons that are putatively orthogonal to the issue whether she finds her life worth living (e.g. fear of death, reluctance to inflict suffering on close relatives, deep-seated belief in the moral impermissibility of letting oneself die). Conversely, one can think of several reasons why a person may perform actions that foreseeably help to shorten her life even if she finds her life worth living (e.g. fear of future suffering, desire to relieve relatives from the burden of care, a sudden crisis of unbearable existential angst). To be sure, some of these reasons might conceivably incline a person to deem her life to be (or not to be) worth living (e.g. if one fears death, this fear might incline her to deem her life to be worth living because prolonging life is a way of avoiding death). Yet, consideration of those reasons involves factors (e.g. persons' mental and motivational states) that transcend the crudely behavioural standard presupposed by the Survival Criterion. To put it differently, even if one endorsed a subjectivist criterion to track the extension of LWL, there appears to be no reliable connection between what behavioural attitudes a person adopts toward her life and the issue whether this person finds her life worth living.

3.1.2 The *Desire Criterion* holds that a person's life is worth living iff this person has a stable and considered desire to continue her life. Paraphrasing Singer, "what better evidence could there be [that one's] life is worth living [than the fact that one] wishes to go on living" (1993, 201).[7] Prima facie, this criterion may seem to improve over the crudely behavioural standard presupposed by the Survival Criterion. However, the proposed interpretations of the Desire Criterion fall prey to the following dilemma. The criterion can be taken to refer to either the desires that the person whose life is evaluated happens to have (*actual desire interpretation*) or the desires that this person would have if she had complete information, unlimited cognitive abilities, and perfect willpower (*informed desire interpretation*). Unfortunately, neither interpretation enables us to identify precise and plausible referents for LWL.

[7] The quote in the text is not meant to imply that Singer endorses subjectivist criteria such as the Desire Criterion (see e.g. *Section 3.2* on Singer's claims in favour of objectivist criteria such as the Quality of Life Criterion). In this section, I use the term 'desire' broadly to cover a variety of pro-attitudes, including wishes, wants and intentions. I take my critique of the Desire Criterion to hold mutatis mutandis also for the *Belief Criterion*, according to which a person's life is worth living iff this person believes that her life is worth living (see e.g. James, 1912, 62), and the *Resentment Criterion*, which holds that a person's life is worth living iff this person does not resent being born (see e.g. Smilansky, 1997, and Williams, 1995, for discussion).

More specifically, the actual desire interpretation excludes the possibility that a person may have a stable and considered desire to continue her life in cases where she does not find her life worth living (and vice versa). This implication, however, seems implausible (e.g. a rejected lover may desire to end her life to make her beloved feel guilty even if she finds her own life worth living; the mere fact that one has an unstable desire to continue her life does not exclude that she may find her life worth living). Moreover, it is easy to envision situations where a person has (or lacks) a stable and considered desire to continue her life even though this person would lack (or have) such desire if she had better information, cognitive abilities, and willpower (e.g. a bright adolescent may desire to continue her life because she thinks she will achieve great goals, although in fact she will suddenly die before achieving those goals; an old parent may desire to end her life because she believes that her only son is guilty of mass murder, although in fact her son is innocent).

Conversely, substantiating the informed desire interpretation would require one to identify precisely what desires people would have if they had complete information, unlimited cognitive abilities, and perfect willpower. This identification exercise, in turn, faces three major difficulties. First, it is hard to establish what exactly complete information, unlimited cognitive abilities, and perfect willpower amount to unless one makes substantive assumptions about worth (see e.g. Fumagalli, 2016, on how one's conception of prudential worth can affect what information one finds relevant in a given context). Second, it remains obscure on what evidential and epistemic basis one is to identify what desires people would have under the idealized conditions envisioned by the informed desire interpretation. And third, the informed desire interpretation yields no independent reason or evidence to ascertain whether the desires thus reconstructed provide reliable insights concerning the worth of the examined lives (e.g. think of Rawls', 1971, 432, fully informed mathematician who has a stable and considered desire to spend his life counting blades of grass).

3.1.3 The *Recurrence Criterion* holds that a person's life is worth living iff this person would prefer to live a qualitatively identical life over again rather than never to exist (see e.g. Baier, 1988). This criterion builds on Schopenhauer's famous remark that "no man, if he be sincere and at the same time in possession of his faculties, will ever [choose to live his life again. Rather, he would prefer] complete non-existence" (1969, 324; see also Hume, 1947 [1779], 197-8, for a similar remark).[8] The Recurrence Criterion faces at least two major difficulties. First, it is dubious that the state of non-existence envisioned by the criterion can be meaningfully ascribed a determinate measure of worth which enables one to ground informative LWL judgments (see *Section 4.1*). And second, even assuming that a state of non-existence can be meaningfully ascribed a determinate measure of worth, one can think of several cases where a person's preference to live (or not to live) a qualitatively identical life over again (rather than never to exist) fails to reliably track whether this person finds her life worth living. For instance, a person may

[8] The criterion assumes that the involved person would not remember her former life when repeating it, since remembering such life would prevent this person from re-living a qualitatively identical life.

consistently hold that although she finds her life worth living, this life includes so excruciatingly painful experiences that she prefers non-existence to living a qualitatively identical life over again. Conversely, a repetition-loving person might consistently hold that she prefers to live a qualitatively identical life over again to non-existence even in cases where she does not find her life worth living (see e.g. Blumenfeld, 2009, 385, for similar remarks).[9]

3.1.4 According to the *Meaning Criterion*, a person's life is worth living iff this person finds her life meaningful (see e.g. Wittgenstein, 1965 [1929]). Various characterizations of what 'finding one's life meaningful' purportedly consists in have been provided (see e.g. Audi, 2005, on reducing suffering in the lives of others, Craig, 2000, on fulfilling putative God-given purposes, and Metz, 2013, ch.10, on engaging with deeply valued personal projects). Moreover, widespread disagreements remain as to how the notion of meaning is most aptly conceptualized (see e.g. Metz, 2011 and 2016, for recent reviews). Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the proponents of LWL agreed on some precise and plausible characterization of what 'finding one's life meaningful' consists in. Even so, there are at least three reasons to doubt that the Meaning Criterion reliably tracks the extension of LWL. First, it is questionable whether people can integrate judgments of how meaningful they find specific activities and projects to the extent needed to ground informative judgments as to how meaningful they find their lives on the whole (see e.g. Trisel, 2007, on various cases where different activities and projects seem meaningful in dissimilar and possibly incommensurable senses). Second, there are profound conceptual dissimilarities between the notions of meaning and LWL. For instance, while the notion of meaning is rarely (if ever) taken to have a negative dimension (see e.g. Metz, 2002), most proponents of LWL contend that there are so-called lives worth avoiding besides lives worth living (see e.g. Parfit, 1982, and Smuts, 2013). And third, one can think of several cases where whether a person finds her life meaningful fails to reliably track whether this person finds her life worth living. To give one example, suppose that finding one's life meaningful consists in finding that one's life fulfills some putative God-given purpose (see e.g. Craig, 2000). Presumably, we would not deem our lives to be worth living if we discovered that such purpose is to serve as food or pain reliever for intergalactic travelers (see also Metz, 2000 and 2001, for other illustrations pertaining to various characterizations of meaning).

3.2 Objectivist Criteria

3.2.1 The *Sanctity of Life Criterion* appeals to life's alleged *unconditional* worth - i.e. the worth life putatively possesses regardless of quality considerations - to hold that a person's life is worth living simply in virtue of being the life of a live person (see e.g.

[9] Even less plausible is the Nietzschean *Eternal Recurrence Criterion*, according to which a person's life is worth living iff this person would prefer to live a qualitatively identical life over and over again for infinitely many times rather than never to exist. Indeed, it is questionable whether anyone's life could be plausibly categorized as worth living under the extremely demanding evaluative standard imposed by such criterion (see e.g. Trisel, 2007).

Barry, 2002). The idea is that the worth of a person's life "cannot be gained or lost, expanded or diminished" (Pellegrino, 2008, 517) and that "under no circumstances should we look upon [other persons as if they have] a 'life unworthy of life'" (Kass, 2008, 300). Suppose, for the sake of argument, that life is *intrinsically* worthy in the sense of being valuable 'in itself' rather than valuable only because of instrumental or relational considerations (see e.g. Audi, 1997). The alleged fact that life is intrinsically worthy in this sense does not imply that life is unconditionally worthy in the sense indicated by the Sanctity of Life Criterion. In particular, one may consistently grant that life is valuable 'in itself', yet deny that such life is worth living irrespective of quality considerations (see e.g. Bradley, 2002; see also Kagan, 1998, and Korsgaard, 1983, for critical discussion). Furthermore, it is dubious that life can be plausibly deemed to be worth living irrespective of *any* quality consideration (e.g. think of a life entirely spent in excruciating loneliness and agony). In this respect, it is telling that leading advocates of the claim that human life is intrinsically worthy speak against "the naïve preservation of life at all costs" (Paterson, 2003, 13; see also the 1980 *Declaration on Euthanasia* by the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for the claim that terminally ill patients can permissibly refuse life-preserving treatments in cases where these treatments "would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life").

3.2.2 According to the *Quality of Life Criterion*, a person's life is worth living iff this life's aggregate score on distinct dimensions of worth meets a specified qualitative threshold of overall worth (call it 'LWL threshold'). Different proposals have been made as to how this LWL threshold is most aptly defined (see e.g. Harris, 1985, Kuhse, 1987, Rachels, 1986, 60-77, and Singer, 1993, ch.7). Unfortunately, all these proposals face at least three major problems. First, there is the problem of specifying *what dimensions of worth* are putatively tracked by the LWL threshold and *measuring* how specific lives fare in terms of single dimensions of worth (see *Section 2.2*). Second, there is the task of integrating these measures into well-defined *aggregate measures* of the overall worth of these lives. And third, there is the problem of establishing *what threshold* of overall worth such lives must meet to qualify as worth living, i.e. how aggregate measures of the overall worth of the examined lives map on the LWL threshold.

Each of these three problems poses significant challenges to the proponents of LWL. For instance, one can occasionally put forward comparative evaluations of how specific lives fare with regard to single dimensions of worth (e.g. the life of Gandhi presumably fares much better than the life of Hitler in terms of ethical worth). Yet, attempts to measure how specific lives fare in terms of single dimensions of worth frequently face severe difficulties (see e.g. Fumagalli, 2013, on the problems facing attempts to aggregate measures of prudential worth intertemporally). Moreover, endemic incommensurability problems plague attempts to integrate measures of how specific lives fare in terms of single dimensions of worth into well-defined aggregate measures of overall worth. To give one example, consider the difficulties faced by attempts to integrate measures of prudential and ethical worth. Suppose that pleasure is a locus of prudential worth. Assume further that a person greatly enjoys inflicting

pain on others. Does the pleasure that this person derives from inflicting pain on others contributes to or rather detracts from making her life worth living?

As to the problem of establishing what threshold of overall worth lives must meet to qualify as worth living, widespread disagreements remain regarding both where this LWL threshold can be plausibly located (see e.g. Garrard and Wilkinson, 2006) and whether such a threshold varies interpersonally and/or intertemporally for the same persons (see e.g. Grill, 2016). These disagreements, in turn, severely hinder attempts to ground informative LWL judgments concerning not just actual lives, but also imaginary lives whose factual components are *ex hypothesi* all known to us. By way of illustration, consider the task of determining where the LWL threshold can be plausibly located. The mere fact that we can imagine lives that fare much better than our lives in terms of several dimensions of worth falls short of implying that our life is less worth living that those imagined lives, not to say not worth living at all. To put it differently, we may find it disappointing or even excruciating that our lives last at most a few decades (as opposed to centuries), that we cannot teleport ourselves instantly on the Moon whenever we wish to do so, and so on. This, however, does not *per se* indicate that our lives are less worth living than those imaginary lives, not to say not worth living at all (see *Section 4.3* for further discussion).

3.2.3 According to the *Difference Making Criterion*, a person's life is worth living iff this life makes a positive permanent difference to the world. The idea is that a life worth living makes the "value of the [world] (including past, present and future) greater […] than it would have been if, other things being equal, [such life] had never existed" (G.E. Moore, quoted in Moorhead, 1988, 128). Paraphrasing Nozick's remarks about the notion of meaning, a life worth living "makes a [positive] permanent difference to the world - it leaves traces. To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the [worth] of one's life" (1981, 582). There are at least two reasons to doubt that this criterion reliably tracks the extension of LWL. First, the criterion conflicts with the widely held view that making a positive permanent difference to the world requires a life to attain some critical level above the level at which such life is putatively worth living (see e.g. Kavka, 1982, and Narveson, 1973). The idea is that "there may be people whose lives, though worth living, are so diseased and deprived that, even apart from effects on others, it seems bad that these people ever live" (Parfit, 1982, 121). In this respect, substantiating the Difference Making Criterion would require one to show (rather than presuppose) that a life is worth living iff it makes a positive permanent difference to the world. Unfortunately, the proponents of the criterion have hitherto failed to satisfy this justificatory requirement.

And second, no precise and plausible interpretation of the notion of making a positive permanent difference to the world has been provided so far. More specifically, interpreting this notion literally would seem to imply that virtually no life is worth living, since virtually no life makes a literally permanent difference to the world (e.g. the lives of human persons seem to leave no noticeable traces on cosmic timescales). This implication, however, fails to fit the entrenched view that

several lives that do not make a positive permanent difference to the world can be plausibly regarded as worth living (e.g. think of lives spent successfully promoting others' flourishing and welfare). Conversely, adopting less stringent interpretations of the notion of making a positive permanent difference to the world makes the criterion vulnerable to daunting evidential and epistemic challenges. To see this, consider the following *Expected Difference Making Criterion*, which holds that a person's life is worth living iff this life makes a positive expected (rather than permanent) difference to the world. Lives making the same expected difference to the world may make wildly different contributions to the world depending on the actual outcomes (see e.g. Metz, 2012, for examples). Moreover, people generally possess neither the computational abilities nor the epistemic access to future states of affairs to perform the calculations required to establish whether specific lives make a positive expected difference to the world (e.g. identify a suitable time span over which the expected contribution of the examined lives to the world is to be evaluated; identify the developmental trajectories of the world having non-zero probability of actualization during the identified time span; assign plausible measures of probability and overall worth to each of these trajectories).

3.2.4 The *Ideal Caretaker Criterion* holds that a person's life is worth living iff an ideal caretaker - i.e. a benevolent caretaker who knows all facts that putatively determine whether this person's life is worth living (e.g. which goods and experiences constitute this life, whether such goods and experiences can contribute to making such life worth living) - would allow the person to live such life rather than to never live (see e.g. Smuts, 2013 and 2014).[10] Prima facie, this criterion may seem to yield a promising basis for tracking the extension of LWL. After all, the thought might be, the ideal caretaker is *ex hypothesi* perfectly informed as to whether the examined life can be plausibly deemed to be worth living. Nonetheless, the Ideal Caretaker Criterion does not ground informative LWL judgments unless one supplements this criterion with a theory of how all facts that putatively determine whether a person's life is worth living combine to determine whether such life is worth living. My point is not just that it is very difficult for us to estimate what an ideal caretaker would choose given that we are far less informed than such caretaker. Rather, my main concern is that even if we knew all facts that putatively determine whether a person's life is worth living, this *factual* knowledge would not *per se* provide informative *axiological* insights as to whether such life is worth living. That is to say, in the absence of a theory of how all facts that putatively determine whether a person's life is worth living combine to determine whether such life is worth living, the Ideal Caretaker Criterion lacks the resources to ground informative LWL judgments. Conversely, once the criterion is supplemented with such theory, then the criterion itself becomes dispensable (see e.g. Smuts, 2013, 457-8).[11]

[10] The criterion assumes that the caretaker is benevolent to rule out cases where the caretaker regards a person merely as a means to achieve some of the caretaker's own ends without taking this person's good or interests into account.

[11] A proponent of LWL might hold that the Ideal Caretaker Criterion helps us to develop a theory of what makes life worth living by providing an epistemic indicator of when worth obtains (see e.g. Smuts, 2013, 442 and 459). Even so, it is hard to see how exactly the

To recapitulate, several criteria have been proposed to track the extension of LWL. Unfortunately, the proffered criteria rest on unsupported axiological assumptions and fail to identify precise and plausible referents for LWL. This failure does not *per se* license my call to eliminate LWL. Even so, it makes it incumbent on the proponents of LWL to identify precise and plausible referents for LWL and/or show that this concept serves major evaluative and classificatory purposes besides those served by already available axiological concepts (or at least serves these purposes better than such concepts). Unfortunately, as I argue in the next section, the proponents of LWL have failed to address this justificatory challenge. This, in turn, makes my call to eliminate LWL at least provisionally justified.

4. Eliminating LWL: Objections and Replies

In this section, I identify and rebut five major objections that the proponents of LWL may put forward against my call to eliminate this concept. I shall address in turn: the *Objection from Experiential Aggregation* (see e.g. Brock, 1993, and Parfit, 1984); the *Objection from Core Cases* (see e.g. Benatar, 2006, and Singer, 1993); the *Objection from Prototype Theories of Concepts* (see e.g. Rosch and Mervis, 1975, and Wittgenstein, 1953); the *Objection from Necessary Judgments* (see e.g. Singer, 1995); and the *Objection from Functional Irreplaceability* (see e.g. Smuts, 2016). These objections grant that the criteria proposed to track the extension of LWL face difficulties. Still, they hold that in spite of these difficulties, one can ground informative LWL judgments and justifiably rely on LWL.

4.1 The *Objection from Experiential Aggregation* holds that one can ground informative LWL judgments by focusing not so much on entire lives, but rather on the experiences that constitute these lives (see e.g. Brock, 1993). The idea is to measure how a person's experiences fare in terms of various dimensions of worth, use these measures to evaluate whether these experiences are worth experiencing, and then integrate these evaluations into LWL judgments concerning this person's life. The objection goes as follows. A person's life can be plausibly regarded as a complex set of heterogeneous experiences (e.g. taking a nap on the summit of Machu Pichu, reading the original hieroglyphic inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone, undergoing a colonoscopy for diagnostic purposes). *Each* of these experiences can be justifiably deemed to be (or not to be) worth experiencing in terms of various dimensions of worth (e.g. prudential and ethical worth). Moreover, there is nothing inherently problematic or misguided in extending these evaluations to entire *sets* of experiences. Now, if sets of experiences can be justifiably deemed to be (or not to be) worth experiencing, then also the *lives* constituted by these sets of experiences can be justifiably deemed to be (or not to be) worth living. For lives are nothing above and beyond sets of experiences. Paraphrasing Parfit's remarks regarding

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criterion is supposed to serve this purpose. For the criterion provides no informative insight as to how all facts that putatively determine whether a person's life is worth living combine to determine whether such life is worth living.

distinct periods of life, LWL judgments "are often made about the last part of some life. [If these judgments] can apply to parts of a life, they can apply, I believe, to whole lives" (1984, 487).

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the proponents of LWL provided precise and plausible criteria for *individuating* specific experiences. Assume further that *specific* experiences - taken individually - can be meaningfully ascribed determinate measures of worth. This implies neither that these experiences can be justifiably deemed to be (or not to be) worth experiencing nor that the *lives* that encompass such experiences can be justifiably deemed to be (or not to be) worth living (see e.g. Rowe, 1962, on the so-called fallacy of composition; see also *Section 3.2* on the difficulties plaguing attempts to map aggregate measures of overall worth on LWL judgments). Moreover, even assuming that specific experiences can be justifiably deemed to be (or not to be) worth experiencing, attempts to assess whether entire lives are worth living face several difficulties besides those faced by attempts to assess whether specific experiences are worth experiencing. For instance, attempts to assess whether specific experiences are worth experiencing usually involve a comparison between well-defined (or at least identifiable) experiences and states of affairs (e.g. eating a steak versus eating spaghetti, reading the original hieroglyphic inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone versus reading an English translation of such inscriptions). On the contrary, attempts to assess whether entire lives are worth living typically involve a comparison with a state of non-existence which is notoriously hard to conceptualize, not to say evaluate in terms of overall worth (see e.g. Fumagalli, 2012; see also Archard, 2004, and McMahan, 2013, on the failure of many 'wrongful life' suits due to the courts' judgment that one cannot meaningfully ascribe a determinate worth to a state of non-existence).[12]

4.2 The *Objection from Core Cases* holds that one can justifiably rely on LWL on the alleged ground that this concept's users often reach intersubjective agreement as to whether specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living. The objection proceeds as follows. People with dissimilar epistemic standpoints and evaluative presuppositions frequently have dissimilar intuitions as to whether specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living. These divergences make LWL judgments controversial, but do not prevent one from identifying *core cases* of LWL, i.e. cases of lives that most proponents of LWL deem to be (or not to be) worth living (see e.g. Parfit, 1984, on imaginary lives consisting in various decades of uninterrupted agony; see also McMahan, 1998, on children born with

[12] One might object that the worth of a state of non-existence is zero (see e.g. Feldman, 1991). Yet, it seems more plausible to hold that non-existence has no determinate worth, and having no worth is not the same as having a determinate worth of zero (see e.g. Broome, 1993). One might further object that LWL judgments refer to a state of nothingness (rather than non-existence) and that nothingness constitutes a well-defined state of affairs. The idea would be that "if a certain kind of life is [worth living], it is better than nothing. If it is [not worth living], it is worse than nothing" (Parfit, 1984, 487). However, even assuming that nothingness constitutes a well-defined state of affairs, it is dubious that the worth of a state of nothingness can be meaningfully ascribed a determinate worth (see e.g. Fumagalli, 2012).

dystrophic epidermolysis bullosa). As Singer puts it, there are several situations where the judgment that a human life is (or is not) worth living "is obviously correct" (1993, 214; see also Benatar, 2006, ch.2).

There are at least two reasons to doubt that the Objection from Core Cases shows that one can justifiably rely on LWL. First, it is dubious that this concept's users often identify actual core cases of LWL. My point is not just that the proponents of LWL rarely reach intersubjective agreement as to whether specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living (see e.g. Finnis, 1997a, against Harris, 1997a, on the lives of persons with severe disabilities). Rather, my main concern is that most of the putative core cases of LWL are more plausibly regarded as core cases of lives that fare highly in terms of specific dimensions of worth (e.g. prudential worth) rather than core cases of LWL (see e.g. Lulé et al., 2009, who mainly cite welfare-related findings to support their claim that life can be worth living in locked-in syndrome). To be sure, many authors speak as if their evaluations of how specific lives fare in terms of particular dimensions of worth reflect informative LWL judgments concerning these lives (see e.g. Kuhse, 1992, and Singer, 1993, ch.7, on how the lives of persons with severe disabilities fare in terms of prudential worth). Nonetheless, we should be wary of inferences from evaluations concerning how specific lives fare in terms of particular dimensions of worth to alleged judgments as to whether such lives are (or are not) worth living. As Sundström puts it, the claim that 'life is not worth living' is "[epistemically and] morally dubious to an extent that the contention that a life with a broken leg is [prudentially worse] than a life with an intact leg never even approaches" (1995, 36; see also *Section 3.2*).

And second, in the absence of clear specifications of what LWL putatively means, it remains obscure what exactly people mean when they judge specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) to be worth living. In particular, the mere fact that some people endorse nominally similar LWL judgments falls short of indicating that these people ascribe similar (or even logically consistent) meanings to LWL. Moreover, there are reasons to doubt that people's endorsement of nominally similar LWL judgments entails any substantive agreement between them. To see this, consider the debate about what goods and experiences can contribute to making life worth living (see *Section 2*). Most putative examples of goods and experiences that can contribute to making life worth living are specified at a rather high level of abstraction. As a result, nominal agreement that lives including these goods and experiences are worth living is compatible with substantive disagreement as to what these LWL judgments mean. To give one example, consider some authors' (e.g. Harris, 1997b) insistence that a person's life is worth living only if this person is capable of valuing her life. This capacity is so elusive and indeterminate that it is remarkably hard to demarcate what set of lives can be plausibly taken to possess it (see e.g. Finnis, 1997b). In this respect, it is telling that when particular goods and experiences are characterized in detail, the proponents of LWL frequently disagree as to whether these goods and experiences can contribute to making life worth living (see e.g. Finnis, 1993, against McCormick, 1974, on basic capacities to engage in interpersonal interactions).

A proponent of LWL may object that people's choices often *reveal* LWL judgments and that one can identify core cases of LWL by looking at such choices. However, it is dubious that people's choices enable us to identify core cases of LWL. To see this, take Singer's claim that people generally deem the lives of persons with disabilities to be "less worth living than the lives of people who are not disabled" (1993, 188). Recent studies have documented significant increases in pregnancy termination rates following prenatal diagnosis of specific disabilities (see e.g. de Graaf et al., 2015, and Natoli et al., 2012, on the Down syndrome). The available findings may suggest that many take a life without disabilities to fare better in terms of prudential worth than a life with disabilities. Such findings, however, do not imply that many deem the lives of persons with disabilities to be less worth living than the lives of persons without disabilities, not to say not worth living at all (e.g. the documented increases in pregnancy termination rates may be due to concerns about the emotional burdens and the economic costs that caring for disabled people frequently imposes on parents and society rather than to LWL judgments about disabled people's lives). Moreover, even if people claimed to make such LWL judgments (or conceptualized their evaluative judgments in terms of LWL), it would remain unclear what these people mean when judging lives to be (or not to be) worth living unless those people specify what meaning they ascribe to LWL.

4.3 The *Objection from Prototype Theories of Concepts* holds that one can ground informative LWL judgments by building on so-called prototype theories of concepts (see e.g. Rosch and Mervis, 1975, and Wittgenstein, 1953). The objection goes as follows. Calls to eliminate LWL implicitly rest on the classical theory of concepts, which takes a concept to be well-defined only if one can identify individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for belonging to the extension of such concept. This condition, however, is overly restrictive, and many concepts that figure prominently in philosophical discussions fail to meet it (see e.g. Gallie, 1955, for various illustrations). Furthermore, so-called prototype theories of concepts, according to which a candidate referent belongs to the extension of a concept if it satisfies a sufficient number of typical features associated with such concept, enable us to identify plausible and precise referents for LWL. The idea is to identify a set of typical features (e.g. faring highly in terms of prudential and ethical worth) that putatively make lives worth living and identify a family of LWL-related concepts (e.g. LWL_1, LWL_2, LWL_3) united by family resemblances. As Wittgenstein puts it, "don't say 'There must be something common' […] but look and see […] You will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them" (1953, §66).

Prima facie, the Objection from Prototype Theories of Concepts may seem to explain why the proponents of LWL speak of 'LWL' in so many different senses. However, vindicating reliance on LWL would require one to explicate why exactly the putative LWL-related concepts are plausibly regarded as members of *the same* LWL family as opposed to distinct families (or some family other than the LWL family). In particular, grounding informative LWL judgments would require one to specify what makes the typical features putatively associated with LWL typical features of *LWL* as

opposed to typical features of *some other* concepts (e.g. prudential and ethical worth). In the absence of this specification, the proponents of LWL have no justified criteria to establish what resemblances determine membership of the LWL family and what resemblances do not (see e.g. Richman, 1962, and Simon, 1969). Regrettably, the proponents of LWL have hitherto failed to address these definitional concerns. Moreover, the profound differences between the many senses in which LWL has been employed (see *Section 2*) make it dubious that all the typical features associated with LWL are typical features of one and the same concept.

A proponent of LWL may object that one can simply *stipulate* that LWL encompasses whatever set of lives people happen to regard as worth living. The idea would be that what makes all lives that are worth living members of the same LWL family is not a set of shared substantive features, but simply the fact that all such lives are regarded as worth living by the persons living or evaluating such lives (see e.g. Parfit, 1984, ch.16, on how some use 'LWL' to mean lives in which good things outweigh bad things, with worth defined by whatever axiology one holds). Now, one is free to stipulate new concepts and define them as she pleases. However, showing that we can justifiably rely on the stipulated concept of LWL would require one to demonstrate that such concept serves major evaluative and classificatory purposes besides those served by already available axiological concepts (or at least serves these purposes better than such concepts). After all, it would be implausible to hold that we can justifiably rely on LWL if this concept was used to indicate all and only lives that last longer than ten seconds, lives of persons who ingest more than a kilo of spaghetti, and so on. Moreover, it is dubious that a concept of LWL encompassing whatever set of lives people regard as worth living can serve major evaluative and classificatory purposes. For instance, relying on this stipulated concept would implausibly exclude the possibility that people may be mistaken in their LWL judgments, and would not allow its users to discriminate between inconsistent LWL judgments. In fact, given that people often seem to make inconsistent LWL judgments, it is questionable whether any single coherent concept can encompass all the lives people regard as worth living.

4.4 The *Objection from Necessary Judgments* holds that one can justifiably rely on LWL on the alleged ground that people frequently face situations that require them to assess whether specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living. The idea is that although the proponents of LWL have failed to identify precise and plausible referents for LWL, many important decisions hinge on whether people deem specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) to be (or not to be) worth living. Hence, one can justifiably resist calls to eliminate LWL. As Singer puts it, "to judge life in one condition as more or less worth living than life in a different condition is sometimes both necessary and proper" (1995, 89).

The tenability of this objection crucially depends on whether it is really the case that people frequently face situations that require them to assess whether specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living. It is highly dubious that people frequently face such situations. To see this, consider two types of cases that allegedly

require people to assess whether specific lives are worth living. On the one hand, we find cases where people putatively have to articulate *comparative* LWL judgments, i.e. judgments stating that specific lives are more or less worth living than other lives (e.g. tragic choices where one can save only some of the persons facing life-threatening danger). On the other hand, there are cases where people putatively have to articulate *absolute* LWL judgments, i.e. judgments stating that specific lives are (or are not) worth living at all (e.g. situations where prospective parents consider whether a fetus affected by severe disability should be allowed to die).

Now, people frequently face situations that require them to articulate comparative or absolute judgments as to how specific lives fare in terms of particular dimensions of *worth* (e.g. prudential worth). This, however, falls short of implying that people frequently face situations that require them to articulate comparative or absolute *LWL* judgments. To give one example, suppose facing a tragic situation where you can save only some of the persons facing life-threatening danger (e.g. think of cases where pregnancy continuation threatens the prospective mother's life). This situation arguably requires you to evaluate the lives of the involved persons in several respects (e.g. prospects of survival, expected levels of well-being, prospective contribution to society), but does not *per se* require you to make comparative or absolute LWL judgments. Similar remarks hold with regard to situations where prospective parents consider whether a fetus affected by severe disability should be allowed to die. To be sure, one could stipulate that the question whether a person's life is worth living is equivalent to the question whether this person should be allowed to die. Yet, this stipulation would hardly fit the entrenched view that LWL judgments have primarily evaluative rather than normative character (see e.g. Metz, 2012). Moreover, if these questions were equivalent, then several long-lasting axiological debates would seem to admit of implausibly trivial answers (see e.g. Archard, 2004, Steinbock and McClamrock, 1994, and Wilkinson, 2011, on the debate whether it is permissible to allow newborns who will putatively have lives worth living to die).

4.5 The *Objection from Functional Irreplaceability* holds that one can justifiably rely on LWL on the alleged ground that this concept serves major evaluative and classificatory purposes besides those served by already available axiological concepts (or at least serves these purposes better than such concepts). The objection goes as follows. Failure to identify precise and plausible referents for a concept makes this concept a prima facie plausible candidate for elimination, but does not constitute a sufficient reason to eliminate such concept. For a concept may serve major evaluative and classificatory purposes even in cases where its users lack precise and plausible referents for such concept. To see this, consider concepts such as cause, knowledge, and well-being. Attempts to identify precise and plausible referents for these concepts are notoriously controversial (see e.g. Russell, 1913, on cause, Gettier, 1963, on knowledge, and Kagan, 1992, on well-being). Still, those concepts retain a prominent place in philosophical discussions because they serve major evaluative and classificatory purposes (see e.g. Ferejohn, 2013, ch.1, and Mallon et al., 2009).

The Objection from Functional Irreplaceability may vindicate reliance on various concepts for which one currently lacks precise and plausible referents. However, showing that one can justifiably rely on LWL would require one to supplement this objection with a plausible specification of *what* evaluative and classificatory purposes LWL serves and a demonstration that no *already available* axiological concepts serve these purposes (or at least that no already available concepts serve such purposes better than LWL). Unfortunately, the proponents of LWL have hitherto failed to address these two justificatory challenges. To illustrate this, consider Smuts' contention that while no plausible theory of prudential worth can explain that "there is something horribly deficient with a life of vice", one can account for the deficiency in a life of vice by claiming that "a life of vice is less worth living than a life of virtue" (2016, 13). This contention highlights a putative limitation in the explanatory reach of existing theories of prudential worth, but seemingly overlooks that one may plausibly account for the deficiency in a life of vice by relying on the notion of ethical worth, without having to rely on LWL. To put it differently, the socio-linguistic fact that many rely on LWL in axiological debates implies neither that this concept tracks precise pre-theoretical notions nor that such concept serves valuable (not to say irreplaceable) evaluative and classificatory purposes.

A proponent of LWL may object that one can justifiably rely on LWL on the alleged ground that this concept performs valuable *expressive functions* (see e.g. Blaser, 2013, on disability right movements' reliance on LWL). However, appealing to LWL's putative expressive functions is of little help to the proponents of LWL, and may even backfire against them (see e.g. McMahan, 1998, on disability right movements' opposition to prenatal screening for disabilities on the alleged ground that such screening signals that disabled persons' lives are less worth living than normal persons' lives). This point is especially problematic for the proponents of LWL. For LWL judgments are frequently taken to have insulting or degrading effects (see e.g. Kaplan, 1978, and Smith, 1998, on LWL judgments' effects on persons with disability), and many acts of political oppression have been rationalized in terms of LWL judgments (see e.g. Kim, 2013, on the eugenics programs Nazis defended on the alleged ground that the targeted persons' lives were *lebensunwert*). As these considerations suggest, LWL judgments often have demonstrably degrading and oppressive effects. Hence, even if the proponents of LWL succeeded in identifying precise and plausible referents for LWL, considerations pertaining to LWL's expressive functions provide additional reasons to eliminate (rather than retain) LWL.

5. Conclusion

This article argued for the elimination of the concept of LWL from philosophical vocabulary on three complementary grounds. First, the basic components of this concept suffer from multiple ambiguities, which hamper attempts to ground informative evaluative and classificatory judgments about the worth of life. Second,

the criteria proposed to track the extension of LWL rest on unsupported axiological assumptions and fail to identify precise and plausible referents for this concept. And third, the concept of LWL is not shown to serve any major evaluative or classificatory purpose besides those served by already available axiological concepts. By eliminating the concept of LWL, philosophers will free themselves of the task of addressing ill-posed axiological questions and ground reflection about the worth of life on more rigorous conceptual foundations.

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